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AUTHOR Doig, Brian; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This report describes the results of a 1992 survey of students' economic, geographical, cultural, historical, and political understandings in the state of Victoria (Australia). The conception of some 2,900 students in Years 5 and 9 in government, Catholic and independent schools are investigated and described. The survey is one of a series of studies by the Australian Council for Educational Research for the Victorian Department of School Education. Students' conceptions are investigated through five tasks: "Lunch at Grandma's" (economic understanding); "My Holiday Trip" (geographical understanding); "A Guide to Australia on Display" (cultural understanding); "What Changed This Town?" (historical understanding); and "A Rather Special Visitor" (political understanding). Each task is followed by item analysis, measurement of the understanding, reflection on gender and year group differences, and discussion. In each task key social education concepts are embedded in a thematic context and students interact with the context and provide written responses to a series of open-ended questions. The volume has six chapters besides the overview and conclusion. The introduction contains the following sections: (1) Assessing Conceptual Understanding; (2) The Tasks; (3) Response Categories; (4) Student Samples; (5) Response Distributions; (6) Calibrating Response Categories; (7) Measuring Conceptual Understanding; and (8) Gender and Year Group Differences. The investigation of economic understanding is focused on the central economic processes of production, consumption, and exchange in the context of a small, self-contained family business--a suburban bakery. The investigation of geographical understanding focuses on the basic concept of spatial relationships through the use of a map and a fictional travel diary of a family travelling by car. The task designed to assess cultural understanding focuses on students' conceptions of an Australian identity and the multicultural nature of Australian society in the context of Australia Day. The investigation of historical understanding focuses on student understanding of the basic

historical concepts of causation and change. Students are asked to answer questions relating to changes in the life of a small county town. The task developed to assess political understanding explores students' understandings of the basic functions of government in a democratic society via conversations with a visitor from outer space. (AA)

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